Carnage at Indravelli: A Report

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The ongoing movement of the *Gond* tribals in Adilabad district of Andhra Pradesh against their decades-old exploitation took a new turn on April 20 when the police opened fire on their large gathering at Indravelli village, a cotton trading centre 35 kms from Adilabad town, killing, according to official statements, 13 and injuring 9. The *Gonds* had gathered in large numbers at Indravelli in response to the call of the *Girijan Rythu Coolie Sangham* of the *Radical Youth League*, a wing of the *CPI(ML)* led by Kondapalli Sitarayamayya. Permission had been granted to hold the meeting, but was cancelled on April 20, the day the meeting was scheduled, ostensibly because a "Society for the protection of Rights of Non-Tribals" had complained to the police that the tribals had planned to burn and loot their houses besides harming their person and hence also wanted to hold a counter meeting that very day. The *Gonds* who came to attend the gathering which had been published for weeks were stopped at the entrance of the village and asked to disperse since ban orders were in force that day. Insisting on their right to hold their planned and scheduled meeting the tribals refused to disperse. According to the Chief Minister, the *Gonds* were armed with spears, sickles, sticks and stone; and according to the Adilabad District Superintendent of Police, they also carried with them chilli powder. The SP, Adilabad, claims that the police fired on the crowd after a few rounds of teargassing proved ineffective, and after it attacked the 30 policemen and five officials, spearing to death one policeman and seriously injuring all the officials (who were however not treated medically). According to the Chief Minister, the police resorted to firing after the lathi-charge proved ineffective; and the Home Minister has claimed that the officials had first persuaded the *Gonds* to disperse, but that the *Gonds* had regrouped and attacked the policemen and officials, being instigated to do so by the 'extremists' hiding in the nearby villages. All these versions were doled out separately on different occasions.

In support of the claims that 'extremists' had instigated the attack, the authorities flaunted copies of pamphlets and the 'extremist' group's official mouthpiece, *Kranti*. Indeed, the Home Minister has claimed that the residents of Utnoor *taluk* have been clamouring for declaring the *taluk* as a 'disturbed area', and that government would

favourably consider the request. The Chief Minister too has said that frustrated by the massive efforts of the government to uplift the *Gonds* through their numerous development programmes, the 'extremists' had instigated the *Gonds* to violence. In fact, pamphlets only demand return of lands snatched away by the *non-Gonds* and the forest department; right to tree felling and cultivation in forests; and implementation of the 1964 Act banning tribals selling their lands to non-tribals in *notified tribal areas*. Both the pamphlets and the magazine contain references to the exploiting sections of non-tribals in harsh terms as well as *anti-CPI* and *anti-CPI(M)* references and their collusion with the exploiters. But there is no incitement to violence even against the non-tribals in the village.

LIES GALORE

A week spent by this correspondent in the troubled area and nearby villages gave the lie to all these inconsistent stories doled out by the official sources and vested interests. Contrary to these reports, there were nearly two dozen armed police camps of six to ten platoons each in the district. In fact, an armed camp of seven platoons has been located in the local Zilla Parishad High School on the main road passing through the village, since early this year. The entire police force in the district was summoned to Indravelli village on April 19. The alleged failure of police intelligence is also not borne out by facts. The meeting was called by the *Radical Youth League*'s *Girijan Rythu Coolie Sangham* sometime in March and a massive poster campaign was carried out to publicise it.

The police measures in the virtually detribalised Indravelli village, as also in the nearby *taluks*, on the day of the firing are particularly interesting in this context. The shops were ordered that morning to be closed and the weekly shandy on Monday was cancelled. The bus stand was shifted a little away from the village and nobody was allowed to get down except a handful of employees working in the banks and government offices. All the entry points into the village were guarded by the police and those, especially *Gonds*, entering the village were beaten up. The fate of *Gonds* coming to the shandy for their essential purchases from nearby villages and those coming to attend the meeting was the same in the main junctions and cross-country tracks.

While the police prevented the *Gonds* from entering the village and even fired on them, they personally escorted some non-tribal leaders of the *Congress(I)* led by a licensed quack. He and his followers were allowed to proceed towards Adilabad town and instigate the non-tribal traders and lower caste Hindus to come and fight

the *Gonds* 'burning and looting their houses in Indravelli'.

The actual sequence of events that led to firing are even more shocking. The Superintendent of Police (SP) asked the Revenue Divisional Officer (RDO) — who is the *ex-officio* Executive Magistrate — to sign the firing orders after issuing them himself, following his futile attempts at pistol-point intimidation. Even as the *Gonds*, bewildered by the sudden cancellation of permission for the meeting, were pleading and insisting their right to go ahead with their meeting, the SP forced the RDO to order firing. When they tried to run away in panic and confusion, they were met head on by an open police jeep emerging from the local high school whose armed police occupants fired at point-blank range upon the fleeing *Gonds*. Rhe policemen hiding in the trees and haystacks nearby also opened up their trained guns to add to the toll.

HOW MANY DIED?

How many persons were killed at Indravelli on that day? The Home Minister has stated that because identification of the victims was not possible since none of them were from villages within a five-kilometre radius of the firing spot. It is however widely believed that more than 60 persons were killed on the spot that day and many of the dead bodies were burnt secretly outside Adilabad town. Many of the seriously injured were callously piled upon each other in two vans and taken to the Adilabad District Hospital. When the vans reached their destination, the hospital staff pulled out 10 corpses from the vans; and three more died later. Some hospital sources complained of police high-handedness in preventing proper documentation; for only 13 were shown as killed and nine injured while more than twice that number had died in the hospital itself. The number of injured persons exceeds 65, if the hospital records in the various towns of the district are taken into account. In Utnoor town itself about 30–40 dead bodies were picked up on the roadside by the fleeing *Gonds* or left behind for the police to tackle, according to *Congress(I)* and eyewitness sources. This excludes those left dying in ditches and rivulets and forests. To this must be added the toll in the Ichoda town (25) and Muthnoor village (30). Taken together, this would mean a toll of nearly 250. That many of the wounded too will die is certain, for not merely have the medical facilities been inadequate, but many of the injured have not availed even of these inadequate facilities because of the deep fear of the police. For the same reason, the dependents of those killed and injured have not claimed compensation; in fact the *Gonds* are refusing to divulge the names of their kith and kin or identify them, While it is true that many of them could not afford the transport costs to see their dead or wounded, even the entreaties of the friendly *Gond* officials drew a blank.

They did not even cry aloud for their dead and missing for a week after the firing for fear of being marked for police harassment. Even known names of dead or missing persons were sought to be explained away by the *Gonds*. A senior official working as Assistant Project Officer, who sought to draw out the reticent *Gonds* (being one himself), carried 37 photographs of victims, thus incidentally exposing the official claim of only 13 deaths.

Most of the jails in the district and nearby ones are now filled with *Gonds* arrested in the *taluks* or in Indravelli, including those who had come for the weekly shandy. While most of the 10,000–15,000 who had gathered on April 20 ran in all directions except towards the Adilabad town (35 kms), their whereabouts are still not known. The fate of those *Gonds* who had come from the Chandrapur and Yeotmal districts of Maharashtra is still worse; they have no place to stay, and they cannot go back in safety.

GOND RESISTANCE IN THE PAST

The history of *Gond* resistance to brutal exploitation in sporadic outbursts is quite old. In 1940, at Babhajeri village, they rose against the extortion and exploitation of the officialdom and the upper castes. After the death of many in police firing in that incident the Nizam government appointed the eminent anthropologist Haimedorf to study the tribal problem. Based on his recommendations the 'Hyderabad Tribal Areas Dastur-Ul-Anar' was passed. This bestowed powers on the government to notify tribal areas inhabited by *Gonds*, *Naikpods*, *Kolams* and *Pardhans*, all sub-castes of *Gonds*. The 1949 'Hyderabad Tribal Areas Regulation' provided for administration of a notified tribal area by an Agent; the notified area was excluded from the jurisdiction of law courts and revenue authority, Later the District Collector was the Agent till the system was abolished.

The peasant revolution of 1946–48 in Telangana touched parts of Adilabad district which included Kinwat and Rajura *taluks*, the tribal belt. The direct outcome of this was that some of the then prevalent (it is not very different now) direct forms of social exploitation received a severe jolt and some of them disappeared. Before 1974 only a handful of *CPI* workers had organised the peasantry on their own. It was then that the Chandra Pulla Reddy faction of the splintered *CPI(ML)* stepped in and attempted to organise the *Gonds*. These attempts suffered a setback when Emergency was declared; but with the lifting of Emergency the movement got a boost with the activity of *Radical Youth League (RYL)* and *Radical Students Union (RSU)* of "*People's War Group*", a wing of the Kondapalli Sitaramayya faction of *CPI(ML)*.

The story of the movement is interesting, woven as it is around the legendary "*Porkala Dora*" (Lord of the Bushes), Dasari Lakshmikantam (a former trade unionist tow belonging to the Kondapalli Sitaramayya faction) who entered the scene in 1972. He began to befriend the *Gonds* by working as a tobacco seller on bike and on foot, earning for himself the name of *Pogaku Atchaiah* (Tobacco Giver/Seller).

A major development came in September 1978 when three notorious Telugu *Komtis* (Traders) in Kamana Wankidi, Asifabad *taluk*, bordering Chandrapur district of Maharashtra, were given an ultimatum by the *CPI(ML)* activists to end their practice of keeping the *Gonds* in perennial debt. These moneylenders were overwriting the actual loan many times, charging 100 per cent interest and tampering with records of repayments. When *Porkala Dora* was told about this exploitation he gathered 500 *Gonds*, raided their houses and burnt the promissory notes. The police reacted promptly by setting up a camp for a week and launched a case. (It may be noted that the police had done a similar thing in the last month of 1976 in Lingapur village of Laxettipet *taluk*, after the murder of a landlord's family and henchmen. Despite the evidence and statements by the aggrieved that none of the villagers in the *taluk* was involved, more than 1,000 persons, their are, sex and condition notwithstanding, were tortured in turns for three months.) It was then that *Porkala Dora* went underground, and by remaining active while underground, he became more popular among the *Gonds*.

ORGANISING THE *GONDS*

The *RYL* and *RSU* have been working in this district since 1973, but they became more active in 1977 when *RYL* began its 'Go to the Villages' campaign and formed the *Girijan Rythu Coolie Sangham* (Tribal Farm Labour Society). Since its attempts at organising coalmine workers (one recalls the notorious Rajeswari rape case as well as the hanging of a coalminer's wife by the mine manager's son and his gang) as well as those in textile and paper industries had been ruthlessly suppressed by the police, the "go to the villages" campaign was a secret affair. Peddi Shankar who was murdered in a so-called 'encounter" in Chandrapur district of Maharashtra in December 1980 was a product of this campaign.

Even prior to the efforts of the *Girijan Rythu Coolie Sangham*, the *Gonds* were organised into small sanghams covering four or five villages each. When a *Gond* was wronged, the Tudum or Nagara drums were to be beaten as a signal to the rest of the *Gonds* in the vicinity at which they would all collect in that village. The matter would be debated and the course of action decided. The *Gonds* were advised by *Porkala Dora* to cultivate patches of forest land from which they had been evicted. They were

advised only to attempt to regain and cultivate lands snatched away under the pretext of enforcing the 1964 Act — though their lands were being cultivated prior to it — and not fell new trees in forest reserves for cultivation. This latter point has been the major accusation in official propaganda against 'extremists'. The Adivasi Sanghams were also told to fight the officials if they opposed them in their attempt to regain lost land.

The April 20 meeting at Indravelli was called by the *Girijan Rythu Coolie Sangham* as a first step in its agitational programme (not armed struggle and lightning attacks, as government and the press make it out to be). It was intended to help *Gonds* secure their lands snatched by the rich non-tribals (including *Lambadas*) and government officials. According to some official sources dealing with the land disputes involving the *Gonds*, more than one-third of their land is in the possession of *non-Gonds*, and the land ceiling law notwithstanding, large landholdings of 2,000 to 6,000 acres continue to exist in Adilabad.

ALL-ROUND EXPLOITATION

Gonds are also exploited by the prosperous moneylenders from Gujarat, Telangana, Maharashtra and other places. The large scale immigration of non-tribals into Adilabad started with the improvement of communication links especially the Gudihatnur-Utnoor-Kerimeri-Asifabad road link. This has changed the population ratios in favour of non-tribals, a fact noted by the pioneering study of *Gonds* by Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf who has also detailed the exploitation ot *Gonds* by non-tribals and *Lambadas*. The *Lambadas*, who were declared scheduled castes in December 1976 continue to be classified as a 'Backward Class' in their ancestral Maharashtra and do not anyway consider themselves STs except for grabbing the benefits, depriving the *Gonds* of their due share. Their political leaders have even deprived *Gonds* of representation in the Assembly, thanks to the former Minister Narsa Reddi's skillful re-delineation of the constituencies: The Lambada MLA T Amar Singh, who has prospered well after his elevation from his clerical post in the *Girijan corporation* thanks to *arrack* contracts, is openly hostile to the *Gonds*.

For *Gonds*, the forest department, survey and settlements department, revenue and co-operative department, along with the so-called 'development' agencies and the police all spell trouble. A confidential file in the district collectorate notes that the *Patwaris*, though fully aware of the deliberate survey errors, have not guided the *Gonds* about procedures to set them right. Most of the *Gonds* are unaware of *pattas* supposedly being assigned to them, since they are not even shown the lands. The

Forest Settlement Officer is stationed in Nizamabad district and none of the *Gonds* can afford to go there to settle the land disputes created by forest officials using the 1964 Act. The file also criticises the *Girijan Corporation* which fleeces the *Gonds* as much as any other private trading agency and the lengthy procedures of the Adilabad Jilla Kendra Sahakara Bank. In more than a dozen villages visited by this correspondent there was little evidence of the lakhs of rupees spent on 'development' programmes for tribal uplift.

While government has made a lot of noise about 'extremist' activities among the *Gonds*, it is calculatedly indifferent to the *dacoit gangs* operating in the reserve forest areas. The method adopted by the police to curb this menace is truly astonishing; according to the police, the *dacoits* are '*naxalites*' (surprisingly there are no encounters with them) and the *dacoits* victimise only *non-Gonds*. This is patently false for the *Gonds* are a particular object of attack by these *dacoits* as is evidenced by their attack on two *Gond* women in Jagnapur village near Mallayala, Boath *taluk*, in the reserve forests. The *dacoit gang* which started its operations in March this year has become a terror and the poor tribals and non-tribals are not able to enter the forests for collecting *Tuniki Aaku* (*beedi* leaves). Even the forest officials are afraid of entering the forests though they have been given permission to go without uniforms.

THE FUTURE

The Indravelli massacre was not an isolated attack on *Gonds*; the attacks have been picked up by other policemen in the state. The situation is becoming explosive with the *Gonds* deciding to arm themselves for future meetings. The *nagara drums* can reach tribals in Maharashtra, MP and the Jharkhand. If the attitude of the government to similar problems in the northeast as well as restive rural poor and their organisers especially in Andhra Pradesh is any indicator, we can expect larger massacres. Indravelli carnage was after all carried out by a mere Superintendent of Police, albeit very well-connected, without the political backing in advance or directives from the Director General of Police, who is the greatest engineer of 'encounters' and has been honoured by the highest authority in the land. This autonomy in police administration in massacres is going to get stronger which means that the future tolls may be even larger.